# The FBI's Legacy of Shame

By Les Payne

The FBI, for me, always has been a criminal organization. With its provocateurs, surveillance and other questionable tactics, the bureau deserves a separate annual crime report on its own activities.

The recent hearings before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence have given the world an official glimpse of the FBI's illegal pursuit of Martin Luther King. As a black native of this country, I have been privy to methods of the FBI and other enforcement groups at their undisciplined worst.

The Alabama town where I was born and lived a dozen years had a reputation for dealing with "uppity niggers." Tuscalōosa was a town of dust and cotton, of drunken politicians and corrupted redneck sheriffs. It had a paper mill that stunk up the town, a box factory, and an iron foundry that attracted desperate laborers, drove them to ill health and rushed them, often without family benefits, to bliss eternal.

Tuscaloosa was the home of Robert Shelton, the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan. The University of Alabama was there too, but for blacks it was just another cafeteria to be manned, more floors to be mopped at 10 cents an hour. It was in Tuscaloosa that I first learned what law and order really means for black people in this republic. The aggressive, spirited black child was singled out early as a potential enemy of the state. He cut his teeth under the scowl of the county sheriff who decided whether to reserve a bunk for him in the reformatory or a plot in the cemetery. That spirited temperament, which promised white youths a dean's chair or a general's star, made the black manchild a serious threat to the peculiar ways of the South.

I was cut from a long line of resisting pioneer stock. And many a night, as a child, I was awakened by that unmistakable knock, that blinding flash of light, as the sheriff's men poked and swaggered about our house looking for "niggers" to put through night stick beatings, called "walnut drills," down at the stationhouse. Arrest without cause is described by Alexander Solzhenitsyn as "an unassimilable spiritual earthquake not every person can cope with." My parents sought to save my two older brothers and me from the Gulag that was Tuscaloosa. So we went to Hartford, in 1954, as much like refugees as we were immigrants.

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The Supreme Court had outlawed segregation in 1954. Blacks reasoned that those who opposed desegregation were against the law. They found instead that the cops were brutalizing those who were trying to uphold the law of the land. During the Spartans' rule over the Helots, state terror was used to weed out the aggressive slaves and halt that inevitable drive for liberation. In much the same way, police brutality and more subtle forms of racism are used in the South and the urban North to keep the black labor force unskilled, isolated and passive.

Nowhere in the republic has there yet been uncovered a more powerful, singleminded practitioner of racism than J. Edgar Hoover. The director's intimidation campaign against Dr. King, and more importantly against every other potential black leader, was not "senseless" and "personal." For the "counterintelligence programs" served the purpose of the dominant race. For that same group places more value on the uterus of a 16-year-old white girl than that of a black; it wrings its collective hands over the carnage at white Kent State while forgetting the massacre at Jackson State.

The FBI, like the republic itself, has become a church unto itself. In the pursuit of heretics, Pope Hoover, with the tacit blessings of the faithful, teleologically suspended the ethical. True, he went after groups such as the Socialists, but he reserved Armageddon for the black Socialists. Hoover illegally bugged King without mercy, mailed him threatening letters, tried blackmail and conducted, with the full might of the state, an unrelenting campaign of character assassination against this nonviolent man of peace.

King's heresy against the church seems to have been his criticism of the FBI's bedfellowism with southern racist sheriffs during the civil rights days. King and his associates had grown weary of seeing Hoover's bishops, in their white socks and dark suits, merely taking notes while the sheriff's good ol' boys were cracking black skulls, setting upon children with killer dogs and rolling black women down the street with water hoses.

Eldridge Cleaver, most recently of Paris, told us last week that things in the republic have gotten better for blacks. But I am of Tuscaloosa, and that state's old outlaw, George Wallace, has applied for quarters in the White House. So has his tweedledum from Los Angeles, Ronald Reagan.

There is sometimes a temptation to chuckle about Hoover's asinine assault on black leadership. But then I remember Medgar Evers, Fred Hampton and George Jackson. And there is that moment, frozen in my mind, when Hoover's vendetta against Dr. King was ended on that balcony of that Memphis motel with that bullet crashing through his skull.

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